

EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT

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Remarks:

Executive Secretary

8/2/84

Date

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THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
(Santa Barbara, California)

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

BY
SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL
ON ASAT TALKS

August 1, 1984

Vista Mar Monte Room
Santa Barbara Sheraton
Santa Barbara, California

10:30 A.M. PDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll be glad to take your questions now ON BACKGROUND.

Q Well, is this it? I mean, is it your view now, or this government's view that the prospect for talks in Vienna is no longer there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The Soviet response is surely not encouraging. They have hardened their position, set forth preconditions, and sought to prejudge the outcome of the Vienna talks. Thus it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Soviets were not serious about their proposal when they first presented it on June 29.

We hope, however, that this is not the end of the road. The Soviets claim that their proposal for talks in Vienna in September remains in force. For our part, we have repeatedly told them that we accept their proposal; that we are prepared to have a delegation in Vienna to engage in serious talks on outer space, including antisatellite weapons, and that we approach the talks without precondition.

If the Soviets are prepared to address the issue on the same basis, it should be possible to begin talks in Vienna this fall.

Q Are we sending them another note through diplomatic channels, or have we received a note back through diplomatic channels? Or is it just this press briefing that you're responding to?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We have received a formal expression of the Soviet position in diplomatic channels which was concurrently made public by the Soviet Union.

Q So, you don't now expect talks to take place?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We don't rule it out. We cannot be encouraged by what the Soviets have said. We remain willing to press on. This latest reply is not encouraging.

Q Well, may I just press the second part of my question. Are we now going to send them, through diplomatic channels, a further expression? Or, should they take what you're saying publicly here to be the United States response?

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I've said publicly that we remain willing to come to terms on how to convene talks in Vienna in September. And you can expect that that attitude will be sent formally to the Soviet Union.

Q But -- well, you mentioned you were disappointed that they conducted talks through the public media rather than through diplomatic channels. But isn't that what we're doing here? Did you send them a note? Or is this our response to them, done publicly in a press conference situation?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What I have done is to correct the record as to their portrayal of our position. We are responding to the Soviet distortion -- their misrepresentation of what our position is. However, our own interest in coming to terms with them will be conducted in private, as it should be, as normal.

Q Did you precede this statement with a diplomatic note or not?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we haven't. The diplomatic channels are open, and will be active in coming days and weeks, we hope, on both sides.

Q Do you expect to make a new proposal to them? Or simply express our willingness to come to terms? And, given the fact that we seem to have a firm position on wanting to bring up the nuclear issues and also no moratorium in advance of the talks, what's the basis for any kind of compromise here? I mean, it doesn't sound like there is any place where the two sides can get together.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, Chris, our most recent position has moved virtually within a millimeter of adopting the Soviet proposed text. Consequently, for them to reject that, is a source of great frustration.

Let me say this: the President's reaction today, in having read the latest communication, was one of utter frustration borne of the fact that the Soviet characterization of our unwillingness to talk, based upon our wanting to talk on "militarization of space" as opposed to the prevention of the militarization of space, was incredible.

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It seems to us that the Soviets are trying to obscure, by semantic distortion, what is manifestly our purpose, and we hope theirs -- the limitation, the control over, the minimization of space weapons. For them to make a big point about preventing the militarization of space is rather like talking about the prevention of air pollution. Both of us, anybody, would like to deal with the problem -- to control it.

But it also masks the fact that they, indeed, are the only ones who have a tested, operable, co-orbital antisatellite system. It also obscures the separate, but related fact, that both of us rely upon military systems in space for entirely peaceful purposes -- the monitoring of arms control agreements and so forth.

So, to say that we have to back up and talk about the preventing of militarization of space is a diversion of the central issue here.

Q: But aren't there still some very major disagreements? You say we're within a millimeter of their position, aren't we still insisting that we would be able to bring up other issues, as you've said, the proposed strategic relationships, and aren't we still unwilling to agree to a moratorium as the talks begin?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Two points: One is your point on the moratorium, and where we'd stand; and the other, our interest in raising offensive systems.

I'll take the last one first. We have made clear our willingness to have our negotiators, as an early item on the agenda, talk about what restraints ought to be applied in the course of the negotiations. That is the normal thing to do. To say that we ought to, today, adopt a position which concludes, as an outcome, some kind of arms control limitation, is to prejudge the outcome of the talks. It's also to ignore that you've got to have some fairly clear understandings on each side about how you verify what you are doing, and so forth.

So, it has become for them a precondition that is just manifestly unfeasible. It also ignores or slides over the fact that they are the only ones, indeed, who already have a system like this. So it is, of course, in their interest to call for such a moratorium. They don't need to worry about it.

Yes?

Q Well, wait a minute -- then can you answer the other part about the strategic?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The larger point that we have made is that it is in the interest of all humankind for the two superpowers to discuss control of, reduction of, the system which today constitutes the leading, clear and present danger --

clear that we have an obligation to talk about things that threaten today versus things that are not yet upon us.

Now, that said, we are entirely willing to talk about these future systems, systems that they have, but we don't yet have -- but still, let's talk about those. But we think that it is irresponsible not to talk about existing systems which constitute a threat. No, we haven't made it a precondition that we negotiate these things, that we discuss them even. We have simply said that we intend to raise them.

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Now, if the Soviets don't want to listen, all right.
But we cannot abrogate a U.S. responsibility to talk about these things.

Yes?

Q As you look at the whole record of this thing so far, do you think they were sincere in the first place?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Their latest position makes that very much in doubt.

Q So, what does the administration feel they were up to? Were they getting involved in domestic politics here, or what?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I wouldn't conclude that. I can't account for this change. I must admit that in recent days the appearance was that they were giving serious consideration to it, at least there was some turmoil within the government over how to respond, but their answer doesn't leave much basis for hope.

Q Whose government?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Soviet.

Q Does the administration feel that in any way -- that the way we handled our part of it, our communique, sometimes not alluding to ASAT specifically, compounded the problem at all?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't see how they can. From the beginning our position made explicit

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that we were willing to go back and talk about their term, the militarization of space, and, separately but originally also, that we thought it was an excellent idea. And we have never departed from that position. The fact that we have, in intervening times, characterized it more generally was not a moving away from that position, and indeed, we have reaffirmed the original position. We thought some alternative formulation might have suited them better. But it has never -- the U.S. position has never varied from the beginning.

Q Do you think, in rhetorical terms, that the Weinberger statements maybe set this thing back in any way?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q Why not? Wasn't the tone of what he said just too -- appear to harden the U.S. position, while you seem to be saying that in the diplomatic channels, you were presenting our position in much softer terms. And then he came out with a very -- more hardened line.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think that Cap intended, nor from my reading of it, did he say anything different from the U.S. position. I think that he stressed his concern that they wouldn't talk about offensive systems. But he didn't alter our complete willingness to talk about their issue. And he surely didn't intend to alter our position.

Q Well, now, he uses --

Q One more question. Who -- can you tell us at what level the latest note came from? Was it from Chernenko to Reagan or was it at a lower level?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't want to characterize the level of communication. It has, at all times, been at a very high level.

Q When was the last communication?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry I sound doctrinaire. I don't want to say that either. But it has been very, very recently.

Yes.

Q Two questions. One is, back to the original question, I take it this is our response; that we don't have any specific diplomatic note going to the Soviet Union on this latest message of theirs, is that correct? I mean, what you're saying here is the response?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, no. I thought that earlier that I had made it pretty clear that we expected, we hoped there would be further exchanges in both directions and that

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Q Secondly, generally, what would the joint statement that we proposed say?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that's still under -- it's pending, I guess.

Q But can you generalize it in sort of a basic way?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, without any intent to blur, we've accepted the proposal that we convene to talk about the militarization of space, including antisatellite systems and other issues relevant to this matter.

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Q Which are testing weapons?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that would encompass anything they wanted to raise. We also think it encompasses offensive systems, too.

Q But it was a general statement and not specific?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, it was specific to the extent that it did take their language on both those points, on saying we are willing to talk now about militarization of outer space and antisatellite systems.

Q And other issues? I mean that was --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's right.

Q But generally, just written other issues, not specific other issues?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's correct.

Q Can we go back to the Weinberger interview for a minute? The way I read that, he certainly seemed to be saying that there was not much point in our going to Vienna to meet with the Russians if they weren't willing to talk about missiles. I mean it doesn't seem, from my reading of it, to be much in doubt. How could that not have set the process back?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think Cap's larger intent, as I read it, was to say that the world right now exists with thousands of weapons on both sides, and that's what we ought to be talking about. And so, to the extent that that is the first or the most urgent problem we face, that talking about others is relatively less important. But I don't think that he intended to imply that we wouldn't talk about others, and we will.

Again, I should say that this has never been for us a matter of insisting that the Soviets come to Vienna or any place else with prepared offensive positions to talk about. It's just that we believe we must. And their response is less important than the fact that we get back to a discourse on the issue.

Q Weinberger, on Sunday, made clear that from his standpoint, we would not accept the Soviet preconditions. He said it would be kowtowing. We would not kowtow to the Soviets. That was very tough language.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the language that was formally stated by the highest levels of our government is to what we would agree to do was unambiguously clear and it is virtually the Soviet proposal. I don't --

Q How can you say that? I don't understand. I mean

Q Opens the mouth and it comes out.

Q -- major differences, aren't there? I mean, on the two major issues, there continue to be differences. You haven't indicated there was any compromise on either of the big issues.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATOR OFFICIAL: Well, I guess we just disagree, Chris. This text would have committed us to just what I've said. It didn't raise or make an issue about our agenda in any sense. Indeed, I think we opened a new possibility by making clear as well that we were willing for the joint announcement, if they

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wanted it to, to say something about what restraints would be appropriate, in the context of their moratorium proposal, during the negotiations.

Q It would have mentioned moratorium?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, it said that we were --

Q Willing to --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: -- willing to consider what restraints ought to be applied during the negotiations.

Q You made a reference to the possibility of further communications on this in diplomatic channels. And given that we seem, by your own words, to have moved to the outer-most limits of our position by coming within a millimeter of a dot from theirs, what basis do you see for further talks and discussions with the Soviets on this?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I'll give you a personal opinion on it. It seems to me that the Soviets truly don't want to sit down and talk with us right now. It seems that they do have an interest in talking about certain arms control matters. It's my sense that they want to pick a different time, and I wouldn't speculate on their motives for that. I think, however, that if September's not good for them, then we can do it later. And we are ready anytime they are.

Q Have you had any contact, or has the government had any contact with Senator McGovern to get his view of what they were telling him, his view on it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I have not. I believe that he has talked with the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, but I don't know the result of that.

Q Does this latest round of proposals and rejections by both sides move the overall U.S.-Soviet relations in one direction or another?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think it does. To me, it represents a curious anomaly in the normal tone and content of U.S.-Soviet relations, but I don't think it alters fundamentally the principles which guide each side or their both having clear self-interest in a sensible dialogue with the other.

There are other things going on that are barometers of normalcy and there will be other statements from back in Washington in the next few days on those.

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So I don't think there's -- it represents, surely, any crisis. It's just --

Q Can you say why it is that they don't want to meet with us now? What's your opinion --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry --

Q Why is it that they do not want to discuss this with us at this time, in your opinion?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know. I wouldn't speculate on that?

Q Is the election a reason?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't know.

Q The Olympics? (Laughter.)

Q Weinberger said he didn't know either; but he thought maybe they were trying to defeat the President. He offered that as one possibility.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I wouldn't speculate on that.

Q When do you think the President's policy would begin to pay off, the policy namely of the military reformation buildup to put pressure on them to come to the negotiating table? This is a syllogism he has emphasized. When will that begin to pay off?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: First of all, I think, to the extent that there is greater stability in the military balance, and, therefore, that deterrence is more effective and that the willingness of the Soviet Union to take risks in developing countries from Angola to Ethiopia and Afghanistan, Nicaragua and so forth, seems to have been checked that it is already paying off significantly.

As to when they may see it in their self-interest to come back and talk about arms reductions, next year.

Yes.

Q What's --

Q Next year?

Q You say that flatly, next year you expect that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is my personal opinion.

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way of verifying an agreement after that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The question is once we've tested an antisatellite system, is there any way of verifying? Gosh, yes. There are some you can and some you can't. I don't mean to be frivolous; but the one, for example, that we are testing is imminently verifiable, if you're not going to do it anymore. But some you cannot. I take your point.

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Q But as far as an aircraft -- it's an 18-foot rocket, that you fire from the aircraft. How do you verify whether we're using them or not?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There are ways of -- such as we considered in the SALT II context, where you can identifiably distinguish the mission of a particular aircraft that makes it subject to verification. But I take your point, not all systems are verifiable and that's why it is useful to sit down and talk about how you can avoid crossing that threshold.

Yes, Debbie, you had a question.

Q Yes, but just to get you back on the question of timing, there seems to be -- you know -- bubbling up over the last few days, they want to pick a different time, we're willing. Are we now saying to them, "Listen, let's talk about a different time." Is there some discussion now of not focusing solely on September, to try and get this off --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I wouldn't say there's a focus on it. As part of an openness or a flexibility, we've told them that, if this is a problem for them, that we are not -- we are flexible on that point. But we haven't made a major issue on it. We're not sure that it really is the central issue for them. But if it is, fine. We'll talk about it any time.

Q But are we going to offer another alternate date, for example, go that far?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, they'd offered the date in the first place. If they want to offer another one, they can. We've told them that the date is not a hangup for us. Any time is okay.

Yes.

Q You had mentioned turmoil within the Soviet government on this issue. Do you think there are factions in the Soviet government that wanted these talks now and they were overruled?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I surely couldn't say that, based on what they've said. But --

Q Well, what did you mean by "turmoil"?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, it may be overdrawing the issue. It took, for example, five days this time, I think. Earlier, their responses came a little faster. So it may be wrong to characterize it as "turmoil." But it just seemed to us that there must have been something going on, some serious thought being given to it.

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Q Would you say flatly the Soviets will come back to the arms negotiations next year? How close after January 21st would you think?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I was talking in a sense of the internal logic of preserving a stable balance, as opposed to the political equation.

It just seems to me that time works to make clear to the Soviet Union that self-interest justifies their trying to put

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some restraints on our systems, and the sooner the better, before the systems mature and more political capital, as well as financial capital is put into them. So, that natural logic we think ought to have already persuaded them to do it, but I think, in any event, that early next year is -- probable.

Yes, John.

Q In other words, this has nothing to do with the President being reelected and being set in place for four years?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

John.

Q Given the overall instability that you've talked about before of three different leaders, and given Chernenko's age and the possibility of more instability and turnover in the Soviet government, why are you more optimistic now that they would come back to the table than you were before, in that it seems that -- why is the future going to be better? Why wouldn't they just continue to build for four years, as they have before, or they have in the past, and continue this arms race, given the instability in government?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I guess I'd conclude that personally, based on the ABM experience, back in the late '60's, and, really, their respect for American technology. At that time, the prospect of our building a very good ABM system led them to say, "Let's avoid that." And they came to the table and talked about it. And with our modernization program now having three years of authorization behind it, there's a very compelling logic to their wanting, as in 1969, to put some limits on those.

Q But they had a stable government -- I mean, they had long-term leadership stability at that point. Now, they don't. I mean, you're talking about logic, the logic of the Soviets. Haven't they been illogical because of this? I mean, in our way of thinking, illogical because of this leadership change?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I take your point. I think that the Soviet military are -- or is a very realistic community of leaders. They can see the inexorability of the U.S. programs and can only be chagrined at what it implies for their position and their advantages. And I think they would exert significant influence toward negotiation.

MR. SPEAKES: Drake, last question. Excuse me.

Q Oh, no --

Q Do you have any --

MR. SPEAKES: Drake, last question because my colleague

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Q -- of the President's reaction as one of utter frustration. Do you have anything more to offer directly on what he has said about this latest development --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President took the Soviet reference to our alleged misleading position by not wanting to talk about preventing militarization of space as astonishing in the context, and his reference was to what he has said in the Japanese Diet about both of us working toward the complete

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elimination of strategic nuclear weapons and that clearly our approach to these talks would be toward limitation and toward controlling and toward reducing and that for them to characterize it otherwise indicates a lack of seriousness and that's what produced -- the frustration, but --

Q To whom did he express that? To you? Were you in a room when he got mad and said, "I'm utterly frustrated"? (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We talked -- the President, the Secretary of State and myself.

Q What do you think realistically are the chances --

MR. SPEAKES: Supposed to be last question --

Q -- that the two sides will meet in Vienna in September?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry --

Q What about the Consular offices --

Q -- opening in Kiev --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Larry has cut it off. I'm sorry.

END

10:58 A.M. PDT

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